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ABSTRACT

This brief examines the major findings of researchers who have investigated the behavior of voters in school financial elections and then suggests appropriate action school administrators can take to make the most of the challenge they face in securing voter approval of funds to operate the schools. Among the factors influencing voter behavior are the voter's race, level of education, age, and economic status. Among the factors apparently not influencing behavior are partisan voting habits, attitudes toward the schools, and parental status. Controversy within a district is more important than the tax rate in influencing voter behavior. Some of the most important findings and implications are that schools can no longer simply assume that the public will support their requests; taxes are not the only cause of election difficulties; "getting out the vote" must be done selectively, with special effort to attract likely school supporters to the polls; the school elections decisions are relatively permanent; schools can no longer count on the support of parents; when a measure stirs up controversy or organized opposition, it will usually be rejected; and voter alienation is a principal cause of negative voting. (Author/IRT)

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RESEARCH ACTION BRIEF

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School Financial Elections

A serious problem facing American education today is the public's reluctance to approve school spending proposals. Traditionally, voters have been willing to give the schools as much money—in the form of budgets or bond measures—as they requested. In recent years, however, this situation has changed completely.

Today in some districts where voter approval of school levies was once virtually automatic, it is now almost equally automatic that school requests will be turned down, at least the first time they are placed before the voters. Although revised proposals, often calling for less money, are usually approved in later elections, even eventual approval can no longer be taken for granted. In some districts, voters have persisted in turning down spending requests until a lack of funds has forced the schools to cut back on educational services or even, in extreme cases, to close their doors entirely.

Administrators of the nation's public schools may find it easy to lament this change in the voting habits and attitudes of the American people. But this paper is being written with the assumption that it is more useful to try to understand what has caused the change and what it may mean for the future of America's public schools.

In the following pages we will look at the major findings of researchers who have investigated the behavior of voters in school financial elections. Then on the basis of these findings we will suggest appropriate action school administrators can take to make the most of the challenge they face in securing voter approval of funds to operate the schools.

Evidence

So many myths and half-truths surround the school financial election process that it is important to recognize not only what is known about the subject, but also what is not known. Piele and Hall made an exhaustive analysis of virtually all the research done on school voting behavior prior to 1973. Their book points out a number of significant facts that have become clear about why people vote as they do in school financial elections. Our discussion, which relies heavily on Piele and Hall's work, will focus first on factors that influence individual voting behavior, then on those that do not. Finally, we will look at some of the circumstances that may be related to a measure's passage or rejection. As we proceed, we will do well to remember that social science research deals with complex human behavior and that its findings cannot be viewed as hard and fast answers to why people do what they do.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the subject of school election voting is its enormous scope and complexity. It is probably fair to say that there are almost as many reasons for voting choices in school elections as there are individual voters. As a result, it is important not to forget the rather obvious fact that, no matter how many indications there are that a person is likely to vote in a certain way, each voter ultimately makes his or her own decision.

Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

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Who Votes How

Some of the factors that may influence how a person votes include race, level of education, age, and economic status. Nonwhite citizens are less likely than whites to vote, but when they do go to the polls they are also more likely to support the schools. Better educated voters are more willing to vote for school levies than those who have less education. Older voters are likely opponents of school measures, while younger voters, though they do not often vote in large numbers, generally support the schools. Finally, voters with high incomes seem more willing to endorse school money requests than do those with moderate or low incomes.

A voter's sense of his or her place in the community may also influence how he or she votes. Individuals with a strong sense of involvement in and responsibility for community life are generally inclined to favor school spending proposals. On the other hand, those who feel alienated from the community and excluded from its decision-making processes are likely to view school money requests with suspicion.

In looking for a way to test this idea, Hall and Piele reasoned that support for the 1968 Wallace presidential bid may have been an expression of alienation; even the word "them" in the campaign slogan "Send them a message" seems to appeal to voters who feel separated from those in power. The authors found, as they had predicted, that areas that had supported Wallace also opposed school finance measures. The connection between Wallace support and school opposition was so strong that the authors concluded that "the Wallace vote was our best predictor of polling place behavior."

Marginal Factors

While these are some of the factors that do influence voting behavior, there are a number of others that, apparently, do not. Partisan voting habits and party labels are not particularly important; Republicans are no more or less likely to vote in a certain way than Democrats.

Perhaps more suprisingly, a voter's attitudes toward the schools may not have much to do with how he or she votes on school finance measures. In one study, Jennings and Milstein found that an overwhelming majority of ***all*** voters--negative as well as positive--expressed favorable attitudes toward the schools and seemed satisfied with the way they were being run. Keith and Braito even found that, in some cases, voters with less confidence in the schools may actually be ***more*** inclined to support educational funding measures than are those who are already satisfied with the job the schools are doing.

Parental status also does not appear to influence school voting. In the past, there was evidence to suggest that the parents of school-aged children were more likely than other voters to support school money measures, but recent research indicates that this is no longer the case. Hall and Piele found strong evidence of a recent decline in parental support for the schools. In fact, from their own findings and those of other recent studies, the authors conclude that "there now appears to be substantial evidence seriously to question the long-standing belief that schools can look to parents rather than to the general public for greater support in school financial elections."

Controversy More Important Than Taxes

The popular belief that taxes determine how people vote in school elections also needs to be examined carefully. Jennings found that there are, indeed, many voters who oppose school finance measures because they oppose high taxes. He found further that these "tax resisters" form a bloc that votes against almost ***any*** school spending proposals.

Opposition to taxes may be a relatively permanent feature of the school election process, but in most districts there are not enough tax resisters to defeat a school measure by themselves. Schools run into trouble, though, when "there are other unresolved controversies in the election." Such controversies persuade other voters to join forces with the tax resisters, and their combined forces may be enough to defeat a proposal. Jennings concludes that it may well be impossible to eliminate tax resistance, but that its effects can be controlled by working to reduce other controversies.

The importance of controlling controversy can hardly be overstated. Virtually all available evidence suggests that when community conflict develops around a proposal, particularly when that conflict stirs up organized opposition, the proposal is likely to be rejected. One reason for this is that controversies often make voters out of people who ordinarily do not go to the polls. Since evidence shows that nonvoters are likely to be potential "no" voters, anything that randomly increases voter turnout tends also to increase negative voting.

Unproductive Campaign Strategies

This evidence suggests one reason why the popular prescription for election success--"getting out the vote"--is sometimes a formula for defeat. This is not always the case, however, since appeals aimed at likely school supporters can be effective. In addition, once a proposal has been rejected in a first election, larger turnouts in later elections seem to increase the chances for passage.

Another popular tactic, working to "inform the voters," while it may be commendable in itself, is not usually much help in promoting a measure. There is, in fact, almost no evidence that voters grow any more willing to support school finance proposals as they become better informed about them.

On the contrary, there is considerable evidence to suggest that short-term campaigns cannot accomplish much. Most voters have already decided how they will vote on almost ***any*** school measure long before an election is held. Hall and Piele found that how an area had voted in the last election was "the single best predictor of school financial election voting." Another good indicator of how voters would respond to a current proposal was how they had voted in other recent past elections. These facts led the authors to conclude that the voting decision in school financial elections is relatively permanent--that most people vote as they have in the past. Evidently, "tax resisters" are not the only voters who have

long since made up their minds how to vote on any school proposal.

If voting in school elections is the result of a "standing decision," it is unclear what may cause a voter to reach that decision in the first place, or what might cause it to change. One possible explanation is that many of the factors that influence school voting—race, age, income, attitude toward the community, level of concern about rising taxes—are relatively permanent; as a result, the voting decision they help to shape would not be likely to change much over time.

Implications

What do these research findings about school financial election voting mean for educators? Many of the factors that influence school voting are, of course, beyond the control of the schools. Nevertheless, there are a number of things schools can do to make financial packages more acceptable to the voters. Some of the most important findings and their implications are listed below.

Schools can no longer simply assume that the public will support their requests.

Most of the American public may still have confidence in the schools, but that confidence is far from universal and does not always lead to support for school money requests. Increasing numbers of voters are reluctant or unwilling to support school spending measures, and schools must actively work to win voter approval. Doing nothing to promote the passage of a measure carries with it a risk of failure greater than 50 percent.

Taxes are not the only cause of election difficulties.

The belief that school finance defeats are caused by a "taxpayers' revolt," while it contains a good deal of truth, does not provide much help to school officials. In the first place, there is not much the schools can do about most of the rising taxes that have stirred up the "revolt." But even cuts in school spending may not change the minds of many voters. Most tax resisters will vote against *any* school money request, and other voters may be more concerned with other issues. This does not, of course, mean that tax savings are not important, only that, by themselves, they cannot solve all the election problems the schools face.

"Getting out the vote" must be done selectively, with special efforts to attract likely school supporters to the polls.

Nonvoters are often potential "no" voters, so random efforts to turn out more voters are often self-defeating. Young and nonwhite citizens, however, do not usually go to the polls, but when they do they are inclined to support school requests. Efforts should be made to attract members of these groups to the polls, particularly by aiming tactics such as voter registration drives and neighborhood canvassing at areas with high concentrations of young or nonwhite residents.

The school election decision is relatively permanent. Most voters have already made up their minds how they will vote on almost any school measure.

Short-term efforts to persuade people to vote for a proposal are therefore not likely to be very effective. General efforts to change voter attitutdes toward school money needs are more likely to pay off in the long run.

Because people tend to vote as they have in the past, voting records are among the best possible predictors of voting behavior. School administrators should learn to use the past voting records of an area to identify potential sources of support or opposition. In this effort, many districts might benefit, at least initially, from the skills and expertise of trained professional research analysts.

Schools can no longer count on the support of parents.

Tactics that appeal primarily to parents, such as sending campaign material home with students, are not likely to be very effective. Some parents, particularly those who are younger (who often have children in lower elementary grades) and more actively concerned with the schools (such as PTA members) may still be likely to support the schools.

When a measure stirs up controversy or organized opposition, it will usually be rejected.

Avoiding controversy is a good deal easier to recommend than to achieve, but there are some clues suggesting how to go about this task. Thoughtful planning is particularly important; schools should try to find out how the public will feel about a proposal ***before*** it is formally submitted to the voters. For example, the use of opinion surveys may help a district to locate trouble spots in an educational package and resolve potential difficulties before they become controversies.

It is also sometimes possible to predict where problems might develop. For example, in bond elections controversies often surround the site of a proposed facility and the features to be included in it. To a certain extent, however, particularly with budget proposals, almost ***any*** aspect of public education, from school policies to textbooks to curriculum to the personality of a school official, may under certain circumstances become "controversial" to someone. As a result, some controversy is unavoidable. Still, with foresight, school officials can at least avoid conflicts that might develop over relatively minor details of the overall educational program.

Voter alienation is a principal cause of negative voting.

Voters who feel, often correctly, that they have no voice in the making of educational policy, no control over how their tax dollars are being used, may easily become apathetic, cynical, or actively hostile to school money requests. One way to combat this kind of alienation is to work to develop genuine communication between school systems and the public. Districts should take an interest in how the public feels about education, seeking feedback from opinion surveys and from forums that encourage citizens to express their views directly. These approaches should be made as part of a sincere effort to give the public a real voice in school policy, not as a token attempt to defuse public sentiment by giving irate voters a place to "let off steam." School systems that consult the public about educational policy may well find that voters who feel that the schools are interested in their opinions all year, not merely at tax time, will not be so reluctant to pay the costs of quality education.

Conclusion

School financial elections can be looked at in many different ways. Some people find in voter resistance to school requests evidence of a need for developing new ways to finance public education. Others find in it indications that voters are suspicious of school policy-makers, resentful of rising taxes, or fearful that schools are no longer doing the job they were designed to do.

Whatever explanation is given for this phenomenon, the fates of school spending programs are still being decided at the polls by citizens who, whether they support or oppose school spending, are doing their civic duty by voting. Perhaps the most important fact about voter resistance is that "no" voters are trying to send the schools a message, and educators would do well to find out what that message is.

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